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ABSTRACT

The Old Order Amish community is a unique minority group that does not receive adequate public school services. While a majority of Amish children attend an estimated 470 Amish parochial elementary schools, some Amish enrollment is in small rural public schools. However, six states with large Amish populations have no significant public school programs serving the special needs of Amish children. The religious values, folkways, and customs of the Amish easily place their children at a disadvantage in public school. School facilities, social customs, instructional materials, course content, and the English language could be unfamiliar to these children, nearly all of whom speak a German dialect, "Pennsylvania German," at home. To better meet the needs of these children, school administrators and teachers should (1) cultivate an awareness of basic Amish religious beliefs, cultural values, language differences, and educational and life goals; (2) develop a cooperative relationship with Amish parents and nearby Amish parochial schools; (3) recognize the rights of the Amish child as a minority and a culturally different learner; and (4) remember that Amish children are normal children in nearly every way. Educators and researchers familiar with the Amish culture should be active in providing information and guidance to public schools; such information is rare and difficult for small rural schools to locate. This report contains 34 references and an overview of Amish history and beliefs about education and child rearing. (SV)

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EDUCATING THE AMISH CHILD

Dr. Thomas L. Newcomb

1988

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I

II

EDUCATING THE AMISH CHILD
A Perspective

Thomas L. Newcomb, Ph.D.

1988

Part One: The Old Order Amish View of Education and Child Nurture

Part Two: Bilingual/Multicultural Instruction and the Amish Child

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THE OLD ORDER AMISH VIEW OF EDUCATION AND CHILD NURTURE

The Old Order Amish have been in America for approximately 200 years. They are a group of Christian separatists that live a life-style very different from the mainstream of modern Western civilization. The Amish church dates back to the Reformation period in Europe in the 1500's. The Amish church is an ultra-conservative wing of the Mennonite church that formed from the early Anabaptists. The Anabaptists were non-conformed to their contemporary society and lived by simple Bible doctrines. They withdrew from the state church and advocated separation of church and state. They were also a nonresistant people, opposed to violence. There was much persecution from the church and state officials of the time. Many Anabaptists were martyred, or fled for their lives. In Europe, one of the major Anabaptist groups came to be called "Mennonites." The Mennonites emerged in the Netherlands regions, and eventually came into contact with "Swiss" Anabaptists. A very conservative group eventually broke off on their own for doctrinal reasons. The group eventually became identified with one of their leaders, Jacob Ammann. The "Amish" of today are descended from this group.

Persecution eventually drove the Amish and other Anabaptists to America, with migrations starting principally in the mid-1700's. Since coming to America, many Anabaptist churches, such as the Mennonites, have grown and divided into a vast range of groups and conferences. Some have nearly been assimilated into contemporary American society. Not so with the Amish. There are a few Amish groups,

but they are all rather conservative in belief and practice. This book refers to the most conservative Amish group, the Old Order.

The Amish (hence forth meaning the Old Order) live a non-conformed life in our modern society. They live in close-knit communities; have rigid traditional dress patterns; use few modern conveniences; use horse power instead of owning autos; and hold their church services bi-weekly in members homes, using their Germanic mother languages. Nearly every phase of Amish life is dictated either by Bible doctrines, or traditional beliefs and practices (Amish Confession of Faith).

Children are greatly desired in the Amish family and are welcomed as a gift from God. Parents receive the ultimate primary responsibility of child training. Parents are to teach their children the values of respect and humility, with the final goal of reaching Heaven and eternal life. Children are believed to be born with a sinful nature, through the fall of man, and therefore, must be loved and trained to accept salvation through God's provisions. The Amish beleive that such choices can only be made by adults, so children must be admonished so they will ultimately make the correct choice when they grow up (Amish Confession of Faith, Articles IV., V., and VII.).

Parents are believed to be responsible to God for raising up their children properly, teaching them right and wrong, along with other virtues cherished by the Amish people (Hostetler). Children are trained to be well-mannered, humble, industrious, and most importantly, obedient to parents and to God. Training begins nearly at birth.

Children as disciplined firmly, but with love and understanding. Respect and obedience are given much importance, and moral value training is interwoven with the discipline.

Children are taught the value of hard work early in life. Young children have regular chores by school age. Sex distinction in roles is clearly identified by clothing and jobs early in life (Hostetler). The Amish place a great deal of importance on the practical principles and beliefs for parenting of their early Anabaptist forerunners (Stoll: Child Training).

Secondary responsibility for child nurturing would be placed upon the church community itself. Children, through the standards of community conformity, are taught their relationship to society values of the Amish as a whole. A major arm of the church and community is the school. The school is viewed as responsible for teaching practical knowledge, literacy, skills, and values that will allow the child to become an active contributor and participant in the church and Amish community. Basically, the Amish are farmers and craftsmen. However, in some communities, the Amish are used in the industrial workforce.

Today, most Amish children attend parochial elementary schools operated by the Amish themselves. There are estimated to be approximately 470 Amish schools with an enrollement of nearly 14,000 (Newcomb:Study).

In the early 1900's, all Amish children attended small rural public schools. School consolidations, removal of prayer and Bible reading, and new

progressive teaching techniques caused the Amish to become displeased with public schooling. The Amish do not want their children exposed to outside thought and value systems. They feel a basic eight year education is enough for their simplistic God-fearing lifestyle. Higher education is not desirable to the Amish. After many years, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Amish position.

In some rural areas where cooperation has been high, some Amish children are attending public schools for their eight years of formal education. Studies are few, but they seem to indicate that Amish children have very bright educational promise. Amish elders and parents want their children in school and social environments that do not threaten the Amish religious value system. For public schools, this is not always an easy task, given the unique morals of the Amish (Hostetler).

An excellent example for public schools would be the Amish schools themselves. The schools are small, serving portions of the community. Sometimes many schools serve a particular settlement (each with an enrollment of usually 20-40). The schools are simplistic, ample, and sturdy. No electric or telephone services are present. Teachers are the Amish themselves, with only an eight year education. The curriculum is basic but rigorous. Teachers and students work very hard. Control is solely in the hands of local Amish school boards and committees. The schools emphasize academic, social and moral skills necessary for the Amish lifestyle. Studies done with Amish permission show the schools are doing a very adequate job (Hosteler and Huntington; Miller).

BILINGUAL/MULTICULTURAL INSTRUCTION AND THE AMISH CHILD

Minority education in the United States has been placed in the spotlight of the public and professional education community in the past two decades. The 1968 Title VII Bilingual Education Act, the 1974 Supreme Court ruling in the Lau vs. Nichols case, and the 1975 Public Law 94-142 Handicapped Education Act all have had significant impact. In it's own way, each has compelled public schools to provide quality education to all pupils, including the handicapped and those who speak other languages.

Much progress has been made in the past few years in meeting the needs of minorities in our public schools. Many federal and state programs are meeting the needs of children from a variety of cultures. There are, however, many minority groups yet to be served.

One of the groups yet to be served to the extent legislation permits and dictates is the Old Order Amish community in America. It is estimated that there are about 90,000 Amish people today, a majority of which reside in North America (Hostetler). While a majority of Amish children attend parochial Amish schools, some are still attending public schools in isolated rural areas (Newcomb: Amish and Mennonite Schools). A search of educational agencies in six states with significant Amish populations yielded no evidence of any significant public school programs serving the special needs of Amish children (Newcomb: Amish and Mennonite Schools).

There are a number of possible reasons why the Amish have remained relatively unserved by special programs in the public schools. Primary to the problem is the fact that this is not only an ethnic area of uniqueness, but a conservative Christian society as well. The society of the Amish interweaves social, religious and cultural beliefs and practices.

Basic to the problem of services is that many schools are not quick to identify these children as qualifying for special programs. This may stem from the fact that, compared to other minorities, the Amish are a relatively small group of people. Secondly, they generally do not, due to their religious beliefs, stand and demand any rights. Thirdly, there is little information or material on the language and cultural background of the Amish available to public education officials.

Educators familiar with the Amish agree that their culture is very different from normal western society. The religious values, folkways and customs of the Amish could easily place their children at a disadvantage in the public school. School facilities, social customs, instructional materials, and course content could easily be unfamiliar to these children. Language is often a barrier as well. Nearly all Amish children use a German dialect, "Pennsylvania German", as a main language. This dialect is the primary conversational tongue of their culture. Many Amish children may have little, if any, exposure to English until attending public school.

Studies by a few professionals that have the confidence of the Amish have shown that Amish children have the same potentials as non-Amish children, and

that their achievement is comparable to other children (Hoststler and Huntington; Miller). Few studies have been done on the effect of bilingual/multicultural education on Amish children. Small studies, though, indicate that such intervention can be helpful (Newcomb; Perspectives).

A number of changes and events would have to take place in order for public schools to offer programs of benefit for their Amish pupils. Change will be needed at college, state, and local school levels. Because the Amish are basically a rural farming people, much change will need to take place in the rural public schools where they live. There will be a need to gain further insight and understanding of the culture and to prepare public schools to meet the special needs of children from this culture.

Educators, researchers and special educators who are familiar with the Amish, and who have familiarity with the limited information and resources about them, need to be heard in educational circles. Secondly, educators and researchers familiar with the culture should be active in providing information and guidance to public schools. Most rural or small public schools appear to have difficulty finding resource people or materials conducive to providing appropriate instruction to Amish children. There is limited information available, and experts are difficult to find. Experts need to be located and identified, and they should be used to develop further programs and resources.

Another area of great concern is the area of special education. The cultural and language handicaps would make intervention in the special education area even more difficult. In general, the Amish accept

special education for their handicapped individuals. They generally cooperate with public officials in this area (Fisher and Stahl). Special educators who work with Amish children should receive training to help them overcome the cultural and language barriers that might be present.

There are a number of requirements needed to precipitate equal educational opportunity for Amish children in the public schools. First, colleges and universities must be urged to include Amish culture in their cultural study profiles, especially in bilingual and special education courses. Secondly, accurate and abundant information, materials and resources must be made available to rural and small public schools that have Amish enrollments. Public schools must attempt to upgrade their instructional programs to meet the needs of Amish pupils while allowing for their differences. School officials must open the doors of communication between the school and the Amish parents in the community. This will allow parental input, and open communications about concerns, successes and cooperation. Thirdly, public school officials must try to better cooperation between the Amish parochial schools and their public school. The public school could gain help and inservice from the Amish teachers. The Amish teachers might benefit from the services and advice of the public school staffs.

Although the number of Amish parochial schools is growing, it would appear that some Amish enrollment will continue in small rural pulic schools. This is especially true in states with large Amish populations such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. Public school officials must recognize Amish children as culturally different learners.

WHAT TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS SHOULD KNOW

To adequately meet the needs of Amish children, public school teachers and administrators need to become well acquainted with Amish culture, religion and beliefs. The following information should help school staffs better meet the needs of these children.

For Administrators

1. Be aware of basic Amish religious beliefs. The Amish seek to live a life that is separate from the outside world. They live within the world outside their culture, but do not wish to become part of it. The Amish believe in their faith traditions, and in the Bible. School subjects contrary to this way of life are contrary to Amish practice. The Amish pledge their faith to God, not the country or the flag. They will not swear or take an oath. They believe in modesty of dress. Humility is placed in high value, and they do not wish to be photographed. The Amish shun worldly amusements such as plays, movies, dancing, some non-religious parties and holidays, and television. Children are taught to remain separate from modern society and to belong to the whole of their own society.

Some school officials may see what appears to be inconsistent behavior in Amish children. Some may not participate in certain activities while others will. Some may

allow their school picture to be taken while others do not. Understanding must be exercised when dealing with such circumstances. The situations may stem from parent leniency and judgement. Some may be more permissive with their children than others. Another possibility could be that some parents allow their children to innocently participate in certain activities while young that will be prohibited later when they are older and have an adult understanding. The best rule of thumb would be to either ask the children personally about what they may not be allowed to do; or to check with the parents.

Many Amish children become upset if they are forced into activities they are not permitted to do. Parents may be offended if their children are encouraged to go against their teachings.

2. Be aware that Amish parents are cooperative and willing to help you understand their ways. School officials will find parents to be willing to accept alternative assignments for unacceptable school activities, or to explain their reasons for asking their children to be excused from some activities. Amish parents often make very good room mothers, aides, volunteers, and chaperones. Constructive cooperation paves the way for good relations.

3. School officials need to be aware of Amish educational and life goals. To reach heaven is the goal of every Amish person. This is their wish for their children. They believe that a basic, functional school education is adequate for their simple, God-fearing lifestyle. After they have learned the basics, Amish children are believed to be better off at home with their parents learning skills

necessary for Amish life. The Amish believe that their children receive an adequate education in eight years of formal school. Amish parents do not want their children publicized or put into the spotlight of social activities. To encourage Amish children to persue schooling or studies contrary with Amish beliefs will only lead to future conflicts.

4. Give regard to the rights of the Amish child in the public school. As a minority and a culturally different learner, certain rights to appropriate education and regard are required. Amish children need an education that meets their unique needs and backgrounds without infringing upon their religious convictions. Amish parents have a long history of resisting public pressure to conform to mainstream society or it's practices.

5. Remember that Amish children are normal children in nearly every way. They have the same potentials, fears and traits as other children. They may try to "get away" with school activities that may make them seem inconsistent with Amish beliefs. When these cases arise a quick check with the parents may clear up any questions.

For the Classroom Teacher

Teachers working with Amish children must be aware of many factors affecting their task. The teacher must be aware of Amish religion, culture, and life practices.

1. The teacher must be aware of Amish religious beliefs. Amish children are from strict conservative Christian homes. They are reared to respect and hold to the beliefs of their people. Their way of dress is uniform in their society and it should not be mocked or challenged. Amish children have deeply rooted beliefs that should not be laughed at or challenged without a deep understanding of their culture. Amish children come from a society that pledges all to God. Oaths, pledges and sectarian beliefs or practices will be unallowable in their culture. Biblical beliefs in Amish society do not allow them to be photographed. Amish children should never be forced to have their picture taken. The Amish are a modest people, and their children do not expose their bodies (gym shorts, bathing suits, etc.). The Amish place all belief in God and creationism. No other theories are taught or accepted.

2. Cultural differences will be another big factor in the education of Amish youngsters. The Amish child comes from a setting very different from the modern world. School may be a very new and different (and sometimes scarey) place at first. Public buildings contain many facilities and conveniences that could be unfamiliar to an Amish child (electric lights, indoor plumbing, etc.). The use

of many modern educational tools may be unfamiliar or forbidden to Amish children (computers, movies, record players, etc.).

Since Amish society values humility, some Amish children may not do well in highly competitive situations. Children are taught to be meticulous, careful, and planning workers in Amish society. Timed tests or speed work activities may be fustrating to the Amish child. Further, Amish society stresses unity of the whole, rather than pride in self. Amish children may have a difficult time handling praise or elevated achievement rewards.

The feminist movement does not exist in Amish culture. They believe in the Biblical subject of headship. Women are given a submissive role.

Amish children are taught to keep their culture and beliefs to themselves. Children are often shy because of the obedient, submissive role delegated to them in their society. They are taught to be wary of outsiders. Care should be taken when forming relationships with these children. Always be gentle when asking about Amish beliefs, practices, or community events. The Amish, as a whole, tend to keep their affairs to themselves. Tact must be used when dealing with such events when they have an influence on the child.

3. Teachers must be aware of language differences when working with Amish children. The basic language of the Amish home and society is a German dialect called "Pennsylvania German". The Amish feel that their maintenance of this parent language is essential to their cultural survival. Amish children speak Pennsylvania German as their first language, and may have little exposure to English

until they begin school. The degree of exposure to English before school will vary between homes. English is secondary language to the Amish. The Amish written language, used in their Bibles and hymn books is High German (formal German).

Amish children will need bilingual instruction when first beginning to learn English at school. Keep in mind that the language structure of German is different from English. Inflections, accents, mixed languages, and phonic problems will be very hard to eliminate.

When testing Amish children or evaluating them, care should be taken to see that language barriers are not hampering the child's performance. Careful selection of tasks, materials, tests and instructional methods will be necessary. The aid of a Pennsylvania German speaking aide could be employed when necessary in testing or instruction settings.

Since materials and experts on teaching Amish children are hard to locate, public school administrators may need to put concentrated effort and expenditure into providing educational materials that will benefit their Amish pupils. Educational agencies, Amish schools, and local resource people can be consulted to assist schools in the development of programs.

4. Teachers should be keenly aware of cultural differences of the Amish child in relation to school materials and tests. The Amish child's experiences will differ from other children. Concepts, plots, settings, characters and objects familiar to most children may be rather unfamiliar to many Amish children.

Amish children will sometimes have no concept of the meaning of a word, long after they have memorized its pronunciation. Vocabulary skills and phonics are often very hard for Amish pupils.

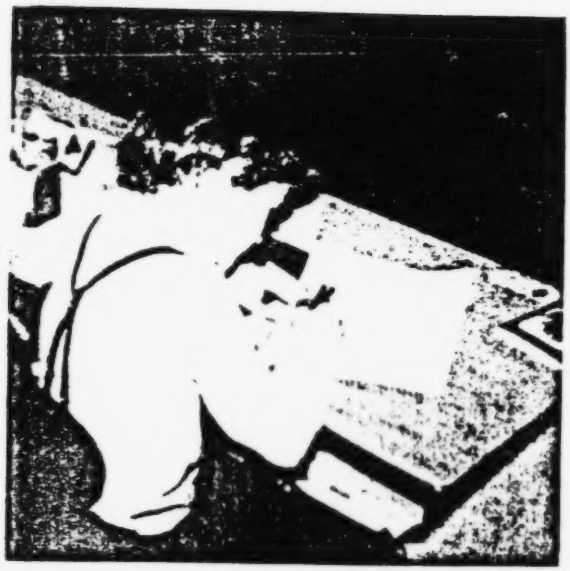
Social and experiential factors can limit the Amish child's performance on tests and evaluations. Amish children often react adversely to timed tests. Amish society values accuracy when doing work. Children are taught to be careful, exacting workers. Speed test situations may be very unsettling experiences to Amish pupils.

Amish children are taught to respect adults and to be wary of strangers. The new social and cultural setting of public school may cause Amish children to appear shy and withdrawn.

Children enjoy working with materials they can relate to. There are no commercially produced public school curriculum materials available with pictures or stories that relate to the Amish child's culture. There are some small Amish companies that produce such materials for Amish schools. Public school teachers could seek out these materials to use in their classrooms.

Once adjusted, Amish children can be delightful, productive students in the classroom. They can experience much success.

A Young Amish Scholar



Another Young Scholar

Typical Amish Parochial School

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Dr. Newcomb has published many books and articles in the areas of education, poetry, religion and history. Much of his acclaimed research and writings have been in Amish and Mennonite studies. He is a recognized expert in the area of Amish and Mennonite studies, where he is always working on new projects and research. Tom and his wife Kathy, also a career teacher, live in Parkman, Ohio.

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